

# USA: Utah lawmakers debate ban on child marriages

Public News Service (27.02.2019) –<https://bit.ly/2U6y3qZ>– A bill aimed at halting child marriages in Utah has been approved by a legislative committee and will advance to the full state House of Representatives.

House Bill 234 would ban all marriages in which one or both partners are younger than age 18. Currently, the minimum age to marry in Utah is 15. The bill's Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, told members of the House Judiciary Committee that the bill mainly is aimed at keeping young girls from getting married before they're ready.

"A girl who marries young – usually if you marry as a child," she said, "you're 80 percent more likely to have a divorce, you're 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school, and you're four times less likely to complete college."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Utah has the youngest average age of marriage in the country. In Romero's view, a child should "get to be a child," and she is particularly concerned about young girls being forced into marriages, often with much older men.

The bipartisan bill was amended to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to marry with the permission of a juvenile court judge.

There was emotional testimony in support of the bill. Heidi Clark said she was wed at 15 because of an unplanned pregnancy, but wasn't mature enough to handle the marriage, which she said became abusive.

"We don't allow adults to smoke until 19 in Utah, to protect our children. We don't allow adults to drink until 21 in Utah, to protect our children," she said. "Society can best be

judged by how it treats and protects its most vulnerable members. Our children are vulnerable.”

Another person who testified, LuAnn Cooper, said she’s a former member of a polygamist group and was forced by her family to marry when she was still a child.

“I was married at 15 to my 23-year-old cousin/nephew because it was a culture that I was raised in and I believed that it was what God wants me to do, because that’s what I was told,” she said, “but I was also told that it was OK because it’s legal to get married at 15 in Utah.”

A proposed amendment to ban marriages when there is a large age gap between the participants was tabled in committee, but is likely to be added when the bill is considered by the full House.

The text of HB 234 is online at [le.utah.gov](http://le.utah.gov).

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